STATEMENT OF ROBERT E. WHITTINGTON, ACTING ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT, CONCERNING THE STATUS OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. MAY 25, 1989.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to discuss with you the status of the air traffic control system. Accompanying me today are: William Pollard, Associate Administrator for Air Traffic, Herbert McLure, Associate Administrator for Human Resource Management, and B. Keith Potts, Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety.

In 1986, following a General Accounting Office survey of the air traffic control system, FAA representatives appeared before this Subcomittee to discuss the status of the air traffic control system at that time. Recently, the GAO completed a new survey of FAA's air traffic control workforce, using the same approach that was used in its prior report. Primary areas of focus in that report, and of interest to the Subcommittee, include: staffing, work load, overtime, morale, air traffic controller training, and system safety. I would like to respond briefly to each of these areas.

STAFFING

With Congress' encouragement and support, we have made substantial progress since the last GAO report in increasing not only the

total number of air traffic controllers but in increasing the number of full performance level controllers. Our data shows that, as of April 30, 1989, the controller workforce totaled 16,464, including 9,689 full performance level controllers. We are continuing our efforts to increase the total controller workforce, and have requested an additional 695 controller positions in the Fiscal Year 1990 budget.

To help us build up our controller workforce with the best available people, we have changed our recruitment system to reduce dramatically the time it takes to hire new controllers. The Office of Personnel Management has granted us authority to test and rate controller applicants, and we also have worked with the FBI to find a much quicker way to obtain security clearances for controller applicants. Where it used to take us 18 months to hire a controller, we can now do it in 45-60 days, and we are able to hire top candidates who were too often unwilling to wait for us before.

We have also worked to increase staffing at hard-to-fill locations, where costs, climate, work complexity or a combination of these factors have traditionally made it difficult to attract and retain controllers. We have proposed a demonstration program at selected facilities that will allow us to offer up to an additional 20% of base pay to controllers and other safety-related

workers. We are convinced the pay demonstration is needed and plan to implement it in June.

I would add that we have already begun to benefit from the demonstration project as employees have altered their plans in order to remain at or transfer to facilities that would be covered under the program.

WORK LOAD

We remain sensitive to controller concerns about work load. We have continued to see an increase in air traffic throughout this decade. This past calendar year, we handled 35,678,046 operations, up from 33,651,904 in 1986. To accommodate this increased work load, we have continued efforts to improve our flow control system to avoid too much traffic in any one sector at a given time.

Since 1986, we have made considerable improvements in traffic management. In May 1987, for example, the Aircraft Situation Display (ASD) became operational in our Central Flow Control Facility (CFCF). This provides our traffic managers in CFCF the capability to monitor and oversee all IFR aircraft in the 48 states with the goal of smoothing traffic and detecting bottlenecks in the system. Further, this system has given us

added ability to assess the potential demand on our busiest airports. This system has been instrumental in helping us accommodate the increased work load safely and smoothly. From FY 1986 to FY 1987, despite industry concern that delays would increase, delays were reduced 5.5% at the 22 pacing airports even though operations increased by 2.3%.

Following a traffic managers' conference in the fall of 1987, a project known as the Sector Traffic Management Program was implemented in the spring of 1988, which established an operationally acceptable level of traffic for each of the 650 air traffic control center sectors.

We also made additional hardware and software improvements at the Traffic Management Units (TMU) at all 20 centers in 1988. Black and white computer terminals were replaced with color graphic displays and additional units were installed. These improvements have allowed traffic management specialists to analyze demand at airports within their center's area and to take appropriate action in advance of a problem occurring. Moreover, the additional computer displays have provided the TMU with the ability to analyze past and future traffic scenarios off-line in order to improve traffic management capabilities.

In March 1988, a refurbished CFCF was opened here at

headquarters. The expanded quarters provided four additional positions of operation to monitor the nationwide demand/capacity situation. The Monitor Alert software enhancement to the ASD became operational at that time. This feature provides traffic management specialists in CFCF with alerts whenever a predetermined level of traffic is predicted in any one of the 650 center sectors. The traffic management specialist, after receiving an alert, is now able to take action to avoid the saturation of a sector, typically by rerouting key aircraft. During FY 1988, an unprecedented 22% reduction in delays was realized at the 22 pacing airports.

On October 3, 1988, following a series of operational errors at O'Hare, a daily traffic management program was instituted for the Chicago area to reduce demand and traffic complexity. This resulted in significant delays at O'Hare, but was a step we believed needed to be taken to address a potential safety problem. From October 1988 through March 1989, delays at O'Hare increased 123% compared to the 9 months prior to October. As the result of the installation of the ASD at O'Hare and the Chicago center, and a moderate increase in staffing at O'Hare, traffic management restrictions have been reduced for the Chicago area from 12 hours a day in October to an optional 3-hour program beginning at 5 p.m. dependent on weather and traffic demand.

Over this summer and fall, we will deploy the ASD to all 20 of the centers. When the system becomes operational, the Monitor Alert Program will be brought on-line and provide our centers with the most sophisticated software currently in the Traffic Management System.

A follow-on software enhancement known as Automatic Demand Resolution (ADR) will be ready for testing in the late fall. That program will upgrade the Traffic Management System and will provide traffic management specialists in both our centers and at CFCF with computer-generated solutions in rank order to respond to traffic management problems. In other words, when our system predicts that a sector will become too busy, the computer will provide the traffic management specialist with proposed ways of dealing with the expected traffic increase.

OVERTIME

We have continued to try to reduce overtime. There are, however, some facilities where controllers are working more overtime than we would like. In calendar year 1988, total overtime hours for our controllers dropped from 735,423 in 1987 down to 615,770. In centers, it decreased from 390,460 hours to 297,167; in terminals, it was reduced from 344,963 hours to 318,604. Our data shows that nearly 69% of our centers and 74% of our terminals were not

scheduling any overtime in 1988. Averages, of course, do not tell the whole story, because, within these 1988 figures, Boston Center showed a 77% reduction in average overtime while Indianapolis Center increased by 16%. And, within a given facility, some areas may be working considerable overtime while others are not.

We have made general progress in driving down overtime, but we are not satisfied with where we are. As additional personnel are hired and trained, and, importantly, if we are able to implement our pay demonstration program as proposed, we expect to achieve further improvements. Meanwhile, we will continue to monitor the overtime situation to ensure that controllers are not working excessive amounts.

MORALE

Morale is a very difficult area to gauge. My discussions with FAA regional administrators and my visits and the visits of my associates here in Washington to facilities throughout the country suggest to us that overall the morale of our controller workforce is good, although it varies from facility to facility and does not remain static over time.

We have taken a variety of steps to improve the working environment for our controllers. We continue to seek the involvement of our controller workforce in the agency's

decisionmaking processes and to improve the managerial structure in which they operate. And, I believe we have made considerable progress in these areas. For example, we began to use an entirely new way to select our air traffic supervisors and managers, allowing the controllers themselves to have a strong voice in determining who among them are the best candidates for these positions. Controllers helped develop this new method which we call SIDP (for Supervisory Identification and Development Program), and NATCA has agreed to its use. Our experimental results were excellent, and we began to use SIDP nationwide this year. We hope changes like this one will help narrow the gap in perception between controllers and their managers.

We have also sought to measure the attitudes of FAA controllers through our own Employee Surveys. We use a Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS) and a Survey Feedback Action (SFA) Program.

The JSS is designed to measure how employees feel about FAA and their work. We have done the JSS in 1984, 1986, and 1988, and will continue to survey a sample of FAA employees every other year.

The Job Satisfaction Surveys of our air traffic control workforce indicate there has been a considerable improvement in controller job satisfaction since 1986. Overall job satisfaction in Air Traffic in 1986 for center and tower controllers was 57% and 60%, respectively. In our 1988 survey, for these categories, job

satisfaction increased to 66% and 71%. The JSS also shows improvement in levels of satisfaction with success in mission in Air Traffic: 1986--59% (centers) & 64% (towers), 1988--71% (centers) & 75% (towers); and improvement in levels of satisfaction with communication from supervisors in Air Traffic: 1986--63% (centers) & 64% (towers), 1988--70% (centers) & 71% (towers).

This year, we also began our Survey Feedback Action Program in order to give FAA supervisors and managers specific feedback from their own employees on how the workgroup and management are doing in their own facility or organization. This year 78% of all FAA employees completed Survey Feedback Action questionnaires, and each supervisor and manager will work with their own workgroups to address the specific problems identified in the survey. Our objective was to give every employee a chance to identify problems and also have a voice in correcting them.

The summarized Survey Feedback Action questionnaire results from Air Traffic facilities were encouraging in many ways. They reflected that 74% of the center controllers and 75% of tower controllers indicated that supervisors communicated honestly and openly; 79% of center controllers and 77% of tower controllers felt they had received adequate training to do the job; and 81% of center and tower controllers felt they were treated fairly.

regardless of age, sex, or race.

We will make our survey results available to the Subcommittee. Most importantly, I want the Subcommittee to know that we are taking our employees' opinions seriously and are not only seeking their opinions but acting on them. GAO has allowed us to work with them to increase the usefulness of their survey, and we will continue to work with them to understand the results.

AIR TRAFFIC TRAINING

FAA made a major commitment last August to upgrade its training process for air traffic controllers. In the past it has taken too long to train controllers up to the full performance level and our reliance on OJT has disrupted our operations and placed an added burden on controllers. Our training has been effective, but oftentimes not efficient. We are proceeding with efforts to integrate much more dynamic simulation into our training processes with a view both towards reducing the amount of actual OJT time necessary for controller training and improving the quality of the training experience. We instituted last August a new OJT requirement which separates the instruction and evaluation functions of controller OJT to ensure a more objective process. A new OJT instructor course was developed and is being administered to a select cadre of trainers who will then teach air traffic

controllers how to conduct OJT more effectively in the live environment. We are also developing an OJT Evaluators course for our controller personnel.

We have developed Operational Position Standards (OPS) to provide a standardized method for position operation, with a goal of reducing operational errors and training failures. We are working at this time on an OPS for supervisory controller positions, using the Southwest Region as our lead region for development, confirmation, and implementation of the supervisory OPS.

Further, we are developing an automated training management system to be used in our air traffic control centers to provide us with up to date data on the training progress of developmental controllers. This system will allow us to plan more effectively for our staffing needs and to monitor the effectiveness of the management of facility training programs. We are currently field testing this program and anticipate operational testing in the centers by the end of this fiscal year.

Much more needs to be done to update our training processes to ensure that we are providing the most efficient and highest quality training to our controllers, and we are aggressively pursuing a variety of efforts to do just that.

SYSTEM SAFETY

The safety afforded by our air traffic control system remains high, and we are continuing to make hardware, software, and personnel improvements. Overall indicators suggest a positive trend. Runway incursions were down from 320 in 1986 to 174 in 1988; reported near midair collisions dropped from 840 in 1986 (followed by a substantial increase in 1987) to 712 in 1988; and operational errors fell from 1202 in 1986 to 1042 in 1988. We are diligently pursuing efforts to keep these trends headed downward.

We have also recently instituted a new approach to assessing safety. We have implemented a new review process, which we call System Safety and Efficiency Review (SSER), that is used to conduct indepth analyses of selected portions of the National Airspace System. These reviews are conducted under the auspices of the Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety, and use a wide variety of talent and expertise from both within and outside the FAA. FAA representatives, assisted by representatives from industry and other government agencies, work together in an effort to examine and analyze issues that relate to the safety and efficiency of a specific location such as O'Hare or a general area such as the Northeast Corridor.

These reviews are conducted in two phases. The first phase

consists of on-site factfinding and issue identification by one or more teams led by an FAA team leader with expertise in a particular area (e.g., air traffic control, flight standards, or airports). The second phase consists of FAA team members studying and analyzing all the data collected during the first phase and developing recommendations for corrective action or improvements. An agency action plan is then developed based on the recommendations contained in the FAA team report.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to assure you we will continue to work with GAO on its recently completed survey, and believe it provides us with additional valuable data that we can consider as we make further changes to improve the safety and efficiency of our air traffic control system. Our controllers', supervisors', and managers' perceptions are important to us, and we will all benefit from the opportunity of having additional information available to us as to what those perceptions are. We remain committed to improving the air traffic control system, and will continue to work closely with our workforce as we do so. They are key to our efforts to create the best possible air traffic control system to take us into the 2lst century.

That completes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have at this time.

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